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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: 10,000 PRISONERS RELEASED IN NEW YEARS
GOODWILL GESTURE

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY On September 10, 2006, (New Years Eve in the Ethiopian calendar) the Ethiopian government granted pardons and reduced sentences for nearly 10,000 prisoners across Ethiopia. This is the largest pardon ever granted in Ethiopia and reduces the prison population by 15 percent. All of those granted pardon had been convicted of crimes; very few would be considered political prisoners. Despite the unprecedented number released, only a fraction of the total was publicized in the local media. END SUMMARY

¶2. (U) Though small scale pardons are normally granted throughout the year in Ethiopia, a release of prisoners of this magnitude has never occurred. In fact, this is only the third time that the GoE has granted mass pardons and the first time under the current government (Under Haile Selassie 1,183 prisoners were granted pardons in 1956 and 1958 and the Derg regime released 209 in 1976). This mass pardon was largely the result of sustained advocacy efforts led by Pastor Daniel Gebraselassie (Pastor Dan), director of Justice for All) Prison Fellowship Ethiopia. Prison Fellowship is a non-profit organization based in Addis Ababa that advocates improvements in the overall administration of justice in Ethiopia. Pastor Dan is a widely respected, non-partisan prison rights advocate, and is a member of the federal pardon board that weekly considers pardon requests from prisoners. The Minister of Justice Assefa Kessito chairs this board, and all proposed pardons are approved by the President of Ethiopia, according to the pardons procedure law enacted in ¶2004. A similar structure exists in each region to decide regional pardons.

¶3. (SBU) According to Pastor Dan, prior to the release, there were approximately 70,000 people incarcerated in Ethiopia, which the prison administration strains to manage. Of the 10,000 released, 263 were federal prisoners and were granted pardons by the federal pardon board. The bulk of the pardons were granted by regional pardon boards: 3,995 were granted pardon in Amhara; 2,435 in Oromiya; 1,100 in Tigray; and 43 in Gambella. In a September 14 briefing for the local diplomatic community, Pastor Dan announced an additional 2,400 will be pardoned soon in the Southern Nations region. He indicated that all of the 10,000 released have been convicted of criminal offenses (as required by the pardon procedure law); few could be considered political prisoners. For the prisoners that received pardons, several criteria were used: a prisoner that had already served a significant portion of his or her sentence; those over 60 years old; prisoners with HIV/AIDS. Several inmates on death row had their sentences changed to life in prison. Those convicted

of corruption, rape or genocide (from the Derg regime) were not considered for pardon. Though the federal pardon was widely publicized, the regional pardons were not announced in the national (primarily state-sponsored) media, and therefore remain unknown to the general public.

¶4. (SBU) Of the remaining 60,000 prisoners in the Ethiopian prison system, Pastor Dan estimates there to be 450 political prisoners in Oromiya, primarily from the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), and 200 political prisoners in the Addis Ababa federal prison. He reported that 232 lower-level Coalition for Unity and Democracy Party (CUDP) members had been in prison in the Amhara region, but were released during June 2006 in a goodwill gesture by the GoE, leaving no political prisoners in Amhara. Pastor Dan reported that the GoE has shown increasing interest in reconciling with political opposition at the grassroots level, which provided opportunity for his organization to petition for release of political prisoners. He continues to work with the GoE on release of those political prisoners still in detained in the Oromiya and Addis Ababa prison systems.

¶5. (SBU) COMMENT: While these pardons represent a genuine harmonization achievement for Pastor Dan and the GoE, they will have little impact on political reconciliation more broadly. The GoE reportedly declined to offer pardons this time around to higher profile Oromo political prisoners from the OLF and Mecha Tulema Association, a gesture that would have a much greater impact. Most eyes, of course, remain focused on the fate of the CUD leaders still on trial for treason. Pastor Dan's organization and the process established may still bear more fruit in the future.
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